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ABSTRACT

This study proposes that avoidance of a structure by a second language learner can only be claimed for instances where it can be demonstrated that the learner "knows" the avoided language form and that native speakers are expected to use a particular form in that context. Research is reviewed, particularly a study by J. Schachter (1974) in which it is claimed that language differences lead to avoidance. In contrast to this and other studies, the present study claims that the role of contrastive analysis in predicting true avoidance is to show positive transfer potential, or structural similarities, thus contributing to the necessary assumptions about knowledge of the target structure. A third element in a definition of true avoidance is the obligatory environment which in this study refers to semantic or pragmatic features attached to the selection of a particular form contrasted with other paraphrastic options. An experiment in the use of the passive by six native English speakers and six Hebrew-English bilinguals was conducted to test these claims. Subjects were asked to respond to cues containing passive constructions. A comparison of native speaker responses and the bilinguals' responses yielded the following results: (1) the use of the passive by native speakers seems to be topic-dependent, but not that of the bilingual students; and (2) the Hebrew speakers seemed to transfer the lack of usage of the passive in Hebrew to English. It is concluded that true avoidance of a structure in the target language is based, not on ignorance, but on the semantic constraints imposed on that structure in the native language, and that it remains to be seen whether the ability to select a form from among options in a second language is acquireable. (AM)

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SEMANTIC PRESUPPOSITIONS UNDERLYING AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

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In her 1974 paper, Schachter claimed that contrastive analysis similarities led to errors of production while differences predicted by a priori contrastive analysis led to learner's non-use of the target structure. Schachter termed such non-use because of differences avoidance. In her study, she claimed that Persian and Arabic speakers produced more errors because they assumed they could transfer native language rules to English. They therefore produced more sentences containing the construction she was studying and more errors as well. This article will discuss a case where a priori contrastive analysis would also have predicted positive transfer (as with Schachter's Persian and Arabic subjects). While learners in the study reported here demonstrated that they could indeed form the target structure in isolation, they still avoided its use in discourse.

It shall be claimed that this kind of avoidance, which shall be referred to as true avoidance, must assume contrastive analysis congruence or the potential for positive transfer. In addition, it will be claimed that in order to define the lack of use of a target structure as avoidance, at least formal knowledge of that structure by the learner must be demonstrated. It will be shown that what is regarded as true avoidance emanates from the semantic presuppositions underlying the use of comparable forms. That is, in addition to transferring sounds or grammatical structures from the first language to the second, speakers also transfer the meanings associated with the use of structures from one language to another.

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The concept of avoidance has been familiar to language teachers for some time. Lado (1964) drew attention to the fact that a weakness of using composition as a testing format was that the examinee could avoid using forms that he knew were troublesome. That is, the learner would use those forms that he was sure of and avoid those that might reveal weakness. Actual production in the form of a composition would not force errors but instead create the illusion of near error-free performance. Schachter (1974) was probably the first to call attention to the theoretical implications of such performance by drawing attention to the connection between contrastive analysis predictions and the avoidance of particular language forms. While typical error analysis focuses on what might be termed errors of commission, Schachter drew attention to the important fact that errors of omission could also shed light on learner strategies and grammars.

Basically Schachter concludes that where two languages share rules that are at least superficially similar, the learner will assume congruence and attempt to use that structure more frequently than a learner who recognizes superficial differences and thus in her terms "avoids" the structure. That is, according to Schachter's theory, language differences lead to avoidance.

However, how can avoidance be distinguished from some other phenomenon such as incomplete learning or ignorance? Is every case of the non-occurrence of a language form in a context where it might have been expected, a case of avoidance? As Kleinmann (1977) has also pointed out, avoidance cannot stem from ignorance of the object of avoidance. Since Schachter's (1974) article, there have been several studies dealing with avoidance.

The term has come to represent a broad range of second language behaviors from the non-use of a particular topic to the non-use of vocabulary. If during a discussion in an English as a second language class, no one uses the term euthanasia, does it mean that learners are avoiding the topic or does it mean that they are simply ignorant of the term? The same form of language behavior might be random. Or it might be intentional but not motivated by a desire to avoid the concept but to avoid that particular word because of the inability to pronounce the voiceless th.

In some studies of avoidance, it has been assumed that any non-occurrence of a form in an environment where that form might have occurred is an instance of avoidance. However, part of the problem of identifying true avoidance is the prior specification of obligatory environments for the use of the avoided form as opposed to the use of other paraphrastic options. For example, can the non-use of relative clauses be termed avoidance without comparing it to native speaker norms?

As a beginning definition, therefore, it is proposed that avoidance can only be claimed for instances where it can be demonstrated at least that--

1. the learner "knows" the avoided language form. That is, the learner knows what he is avoiding.
2. native speakers are expected to use a particular form in that context.

Ignorance, Knowledge and the Identification of Avoidance

Schachter (1974) did not demonstrate that the Japanese students in her study who were producing fewer relative clauses in fact knew the rules for producing such structures. It was assumed that they avoided relative

clauses because they recognized differences in the formal characteristics of this formation between English and Japanese whereas Persian and Arabic speakers did not.

In the sense in which I have proposed a definiation of avoidance, the Japanese learners of English perhaps demonstrated ignorance or partial acquisition. That is, the Japanese students may have been at an earlier developmental stage and may simply have indicated that they had not yet acquired the form completely. What was identified as a case of avoidance could also have been identified as a case of ignorance. (This point is not meant to be mere word-play but to emphasize the different roles of ignorance and knowledge in learner errors.) The fact that there were some occurrences of the relative clause in Japanese compositions would also indicate that what was exhibited was partial or incomplete acquisition, or the Corder's (1967) scheme- pre-systematic use of the L2 structure. The Japanese learner may have grasped some aspects of the formal rule but not others and in recognition of this partial ignorance, the learner used another structure. That is, when given a choice, learners will always use what they know or think they know and not use what is not yet known. Logically, it is difficult to term the non-use of unacquired knowledge, avoidance. This would be equivalent to claiming that beginners in ESL were avoiding most of the English language.

The Persian and Arabic speakers in Schachter's (1974) study, because of the possibility of positive transfer at some level, were further along in the acquisition of the rules for relative clause sentences. They were therefore less ignorant of this structure in the sense used above.

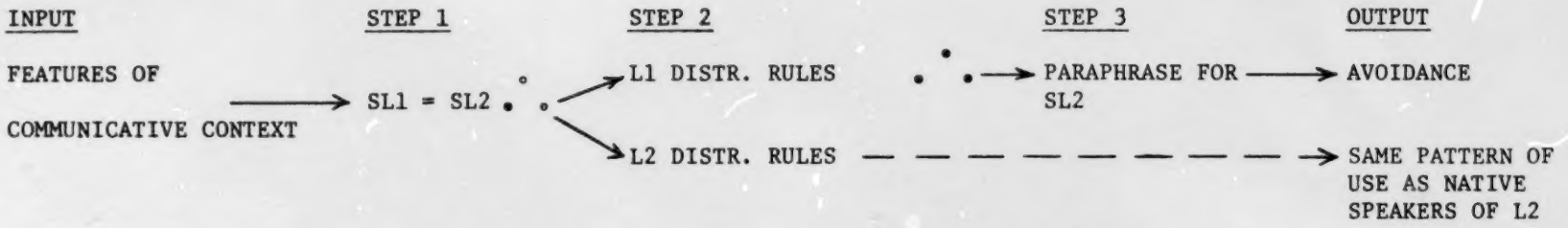
There are of course difficulties in making the distinction between

ignorance and knowledge for the purposes of claiming avoidance. One primary difficulty is the fact that in the literature avoidance is a psycholinguistic concept standing for some covert strategy used by learners in relation to structures in the target language. However, another way of viewing the patterned non-use of L2 structures would be to view this behavior as being in some way rule governed and determined by the transference of a false linguistic universal. That is, rather than seeing avoidance as a strategy, it may be viewed as being part of the set of rules that comprise the competence of the incipient bilingual. And in that case such a competence might very well reflect an amalgam of rules from both the source and target languages. In this second view, the view that is being proposed in this paper, avoidance is the end product in the application of a false linguistic universal. For example, a learner may be aided in the acquisition of a linguistic form by certain linguistic universals or shared structures in L1 and L2 but has not yet acquired the contextual or distributional rules applying to the structure in L2. That is, what is seen as avoidance may be simply a mismatch between form and distribution. Such a case will be described later in this paper.

Another difficulty in identifying true avoidance is that we are doing this from the viewpoint of the target structure and not from inside the learner's head. Current definitions make too many assumptions about what the learner is doing. In a sense, it is a definition of avoidance from the perspective of the avoidee and not from the perspective of the avoider.

DIAGRAM I

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR AVOIDANCE
(Structures Similar but Semantic Distribution Rules Different)



Step 1: Learner notes structural similarities between structure in L1 (SL1) and corresponding structure in L2 (SL2)

∴ : therefore

Step 2: Assumption that same meaning attached to L2 structure and that same distribution rules apply

∴ : therefore

Step 3: Use of L2 structure in this particular context is prevented and a paraphrase is selected instead resulting in what is interpreted as AVOIDANCE

English speakers might be more confident discussing avoidance if the subject were English speakers learning another language. In such a case we could call on all the psycholinguistic intuitions we have about our own language and the target (language) of our avoidance.[1] For this reason, many of the discussion of avoidance seem to be a kind of linguistics of paranoia, that is, we postulate all kinds of motivations or strategies for the stranger avoiding forms in our language while these motivations may in fact not exist. Again, what is sometimes identified as avoidance may either be ignorance or the presystematic use of a language form that has been incompletely acquired.

The Role of Contrastive Analysis

It should be noted that the role of contrastive analysis in defining avoidance is quite different from that assigned to it in other studies. Previous studies have claimed that contrastive analysis differences would predict avoidance. This study claims that the role of contrastive analysis in predicting true avoidance is where it can show positive transfer potential thus contributing to the necessary assumptions about knowledge of the target structure.

This study proposes, perhaps paradoxically, that the case for avoidance is much stronger where it can be shown that learners are not using a form which contrastive analysis has shown to be similar to one in the source language. That is, where CA can show that L1 and L2 share the same rules at least at some formal level, there is a better basis for assuming some knowledge of the target structure on the basis of a universal. We are then in a better position to claim avoidance because of familiarity with the target of avoidance.

As an example, contrastive analysis shows that Haitian Creole has no passive form but French has. Given a hypothetical class in which there are French speakers and speakers of Haitian Creole who have not learned French, a valid claim for avoidance could be made only if the French speakers did not use the passive in English. However, if the Creole speakers did not use the passive in English, it would be difficult to claim that avoidance of some kind were being employed. It might well be that Creole speakers do not use the passive because it does not exist conceptually in L1 and it has not yet been acquired in L2.[2]

Before proceeding, let us expand the previous definition of avoidance to include the points thus far. As before, avoidance may be said to occure if--

1. the learner can demonstrate knowledge of the form, at least in isolation.
2. obligatory environments for use of the form by native speakers can be identified.

To those previously mentioned points, the following requirement for the identification of avoidance may now be added:

3. there is a similar form in L1 such that the L1 form requires at the structural or formal level, basically the same rules for the realization of the form in L2. Essentially this is what is meant when the learner says to himself, "Oh, the relative clause in English is just like the relative clause in my L1."[3]

Parts #1 and #3 of the definition are necessary to demonstrate knowledge of the target of avoidance. The learner can demonstrate one level

of knowledge by actually producing sentences in the target structure. In addition, where contrastive analysis can show the potential for positive transfer, knowledge based on a transferable universal may be claimed. Thirdly, avoidance can only be claimed for contexts where the target structure may be considered obligatory in terms of the probability that native speakers will use the form.

Defining Obligatory Environments

As stated above, an obvious problem in identifying any non-use of a language form as avoidance is to be able to claim that the form would normally be used. As opposed to formal linguistic use of the term obligatory environment, this study will use the term to refer to semantic or pragmatic features which are attached to the selection of a particular form contrasted with other paraphrastic options. In the sense used here, obligatory environment is defined as a statistical norm derived from native speaker sampling. It should be remembered that very little information exists on the use of language forms beyond the sentence level. In addition, most current linguistic models frown on the use of probabilistic information as part of a description of a rule.[4]

For example, it is difficult to define obligatory occasions for the use of the passive. Syntactic descriptions found in current linguistic literature provide no information on this. And yet such information is extremely important for second language learners unless it is assumed either that selectional rules for use are self evident from formal descriptions or that such rules are universal. Most information obtained from linguistic descriptions is concerned with form and not with the effects of using or not using a form in a specified environment.

It will be shown below that even when there is potential transfer because of interlingual similarity and learners demonstrate formal knowledge of the target structure, they will avoid that structure when avoidance is determined by a comparison with native speaker use. In such cases, avoidance will be shown to be caused by underlying semantic constraints on the use of the comparable structure in L1. That is, there are semantic rules which determine when one form out of many paraphrastic options should be selected.

When do native speakers of English use the passive? Recent linguistic descriptions are concerned primarily with the underlying form relationships between the passive and other types of sentences. Little or no attention is given to what it means when one form is used as opposed to another. Within present theoretical frameworks, appropriateness of use might be relegated to the realm of native speaker intuitions much as judgments of grammaticality are. Jesperson (1925) was one of the few modern grammarians concerned with the problem of selection of the "passive turn." After delineating five reasons for the use of passive, he concludes (168): "In most languages, there are certain restrictions on the use of the passive, which are not always easy to account for."

Later, Roberts (1954) attempted to provide rules. His rules, however, seem to be dependent on the ideosyncratic preferences of each individual speaker. He states (131): "The passive is the form most frequently used when we don't know the active subject or when the active subject is so remote as to be unimportant."

More recently, Frank (1972) in a grammar aimed primarily at advanced non-English speakers states:

> Since it is generally preferable to make a direct statement of an action, a good writer chooses the active voice wherever possible. However, the passive voice is desirable or even necessary when greater emphasis is to be placed on the "event" represented by the verb plus its complement than on "the actor" involved in the event. (56)

It should be noted that all of the sources cited here are referring to written use of the passive.

Other than the generally well-known journalist's rule of thumb that the active is more effective than the passive, we have little grounds for knowing when to choose one over the other. In general, one is still left with the conclusion that native speakers of English are free to choose active or passive and that while one makes "a more direct statement," it does not appear that the choice of either is in any way rule governed. Modern analyses have claimed that the active and the passive are basically paraphrases of the same thing. However, it quickly becomes evident that this is not so.

For the purposes of this study, native speaker use of the passive was first tested by asking linguistics students to write at least three sentences but not more than ten on the topics listed in Table I. The topics were given to them in randomized order. Note that all of the cues are given in the passive. In one of the few psycholinguistic studies on the elicitation of the passive, Carroll (1958) concluded that the passive in the stimulus should cause the passive to dominate in the responses of subjects. However, in the group tested for this study, there were no passives or very few passive forms when subjects wrote about the topics

in Set A of Table I and many more passives when they wrote about the topics in Set B. For each sample, process passives, which included the auxiliary and the corresponding past participle, were tallied. Percentages of passives were then found by computing the ratio of passive forms to total finite verb forms.

TABLE I
Topics for Native Speakers of English

(Topics were presented in a randomized order and not in the order shown here.)

Describe how--

Set A
1. an omelet is made.
2. a baby is diapered.
3. ice cubes are made
4. teeth are brushed.

Set B
1. paper is made.
2. milk is processed.
3. a candle is made.
4. mail is sent and delivered.

For example, one student wrote--

1. How an omelet is made--"The first thing you do is to put some butter in the frying pan. Turn the stove on to a low flame. While the butter is melting, crack an egg and put it in the frying pan. Make sure the flame isn't too high."
2. On how paper is made--"Trees are cut down and taken to a paper mill. Here they are cleaned and processed. Various types of paper are made."

It will be noted that #1 contained no passives while #2 contained only passives. This pattern was obtained many times. Some topics in Set A,

even though cues were given in the passive, did not elicit a single passive while other cues in Set B always contained some passive forms.

An anlysis of the data produced by native speakers reveals that the passive is not an interchangeable form with the active. In addition, in contrast to Carroll's (1958) findings, the form of the cue does not have an effect on the selection of active or passive. The selection of one form or the other is dependent on the presuppositions which the speaker can make about the topic. These presuppositions appear to be semantic in nature and would be contained in the distribution rules shown in Diagram I above. In this case, the passive seems to be used in some cases where the speaker perceives that it is unlikely that the listener or reader will be personally involved in the activity being described. This would predict that while linguistics students would describe the distribution of mail in the passive, a mailman would described it in the you plus active form to a fellow mailman.[5]

It should be remembered that the above findings are true for native speakers of English. Selection of active or passive in English appears to be topic dependent. However, this is not to say that the same distributional rules adhere for other languages. While topic is used as a selectional constraint in English, this strategy may be language speciifc. Other languages may have other presuppositions attached to active and passive which determine selection. In related research in Israel by Rubenstein and Seliger (1975), it was found that not only were process passives rarely used in Hebrew but when Hebrew speaking teachers of English were asked to translate an English text which contained many passives having near equivalents in Hebrew into Hebrew, between 40% to 70% of the

translations were put into the active.[6] That is, the Hebrew speakers preferred the active to the passive in L1 even though the form was easily available. It was concluded that in Hebrew, passive or active is register dependent rather than topic dependent.

Based on all of the above, an experiment was conducted to determine if avoidance will still result where there is potential for positive transfer as predicted by contrastive analysis, and evidence of learners' ability to form the target structure but where distribution rules which determine the selection of one of the paraphrastic options are different. In this specific case, the performance of native speakers of English in English was compared with the performance of Hebrew English bilinguals in English with regard to the use of the passive. The prediction was that native speaker performance will vary according to topic while non-native speaker performance will conform with the distribution of the same form in L1; that is, it will be consistently avoided.

Description of the Experiment

The subjects used in this experiment were all adults. The six native English speakers were undergraduate students and secretaries. The six Hebrew-English bilinguals were all matriculating college students enrolled in regular college courses as well as advanced composition courses for foreign students. They had scored 500 or above on the TOEFL examination. All subjects were asked to respond orally to the cues in Table II. Their responses were taped and later transcribed.

TABLE II: Cues for Oral Responses

(Instructions were the same for all subjects)

1. Describe how an omelet is made.

2. Describe how a baby is diapered.

3. Describe how oranges are picked and sent to market.

4. Describe how mail is sent and delivered.

Based on the previous findings with native speakers it was predicted that the six native speakers would use more passives for the last two topics while no difference would be found for non-native speakers.

In addition, in order to test for at least formal knowledge of the passive, the Hebrew-English bilinguals were asked to transform the test sentences listed below in Table III to the passive after they had responded to the cues in Table II.

TABLE III: Test Sentences for Hebrew-English Bilinguals

1. He watered the garden.

2. Someone has slept in his bed.

3. They presented a prize to her.

4. They gave John the money.

5. They believe that she is rich.

The prediction was that, while the Hebrew-English bilinguals could demonstrate their knowledge of the passive by successfully transforming the test sentences, they would avoid using it when responding to the cues in Table II because its use in Hebrew is rare. That is, the cause of avoidance would not be ignorance of the structure but rather interference from distribution rules in L1.

Results

The results of the comparison between native English speakers and the Hebrew English bilinguals for the use of passive can be seen in Table IV below. The table shows the mean percentages of process passive forms

compared to total finite verb forms for cues 1 through 4 listed under Table II. An asterisk (*) between mean scores indicates a significant difference for $p < .01$. Table V shows the range of percentages of passive to total finite verb forms.

TABLE IV: Mean Group Percentages of Passive/Total Finite Verb Forms by Cues

	omelet	baby		oranges	mail
English speakers	5.5%	11.5%	*	62.6%	62.6%
Hebrew-English speakers	0%	1.5%		3.6% *	7.6% *

TABLE V: Range of Passive to Finite Verb Forms within Groups

	omelet	baby	oranges	mail
English speakers	0-14%	0-33%	33-89%	40-90%
Hebrew-English speakers	0	0-9%	0-14%	0-20%

No inter- or intra-group differences were found when subjects were asked to respond to the first two cues. However, significant inter- and intra-group differences were found for the comparisons of performance on the last two cues. English speakers used many more passives on the last two forms. The group mean for passives increased noticeably for these topics. While there was some increase in the use of passives by the bilingual group, this increase was not significant and does not approach the sharp incline shown by the native speakers. As shown in Table V, native speaker use of the passive for the last two topics reaches 90% of total finite verb forms produced.

Table V indicates that some members of the Hebrew-English group did vary in their use of the passive. Since subjects in this group had been in the United States for as little as eight months and for as long as seven years, the increase in the percentage of use of the passive may reflect the gradual acquisition of the distributional rules present in the native speakers' grammar.

The bilingual group performed generally well on the test sentences in Table III. Sentence #2 proved very difficult for them and their response to the cue sentence was either to say, "That's impossible," or to change the main verb to something they felt they could more easily passivize. One subject transformed this sentences into--"his bed was occupied by someone." A possible explanation for their inability to passivize slept in is that this verb does not have a passive form in Hebrew. The verb sleep occurs only as an intransitive verb. As expected, the subject raising required by sentence #5 caused some problems but fewer than those caused by sentence #2.

After one recording session, a bilingual subject was specifically instructed in Hebrew by the experimenter to discuss how mail is sent and delivered in Hebrew. In addition, he was told to use the passive. The subject began easily enough but after a few moments he stopped and said, "It's so strange. You could say it in passive but nobody would." When the same procedure was used with another Hebrew speaker, the subject stated, "People just don't use the passive in Hebrew because it's too difficult." More likely, the subject was expressing the general infrequency of the passive in Hebrew rather than the intrinsic difficulty of the form. English speakers learning Hebrew, learn the passive form

without great difficulty. (See footnote 2 above.)

Conclusions

The data show that there is a significant difference which appears to be topic dependent about the way native speakers use the passive. However, the performance of the bilingual subjects did not appear to be topic dependent. Hebrew English speakers maintained a consistent avoidance of this form. It is claimed that Hebrew speakers avoid the passive in English because they do not use it in their own language and they apparently transfer this preference for the active over to English.

Non-use of target language structures can result from differences between L1 and L2, ignorance, non-acquisition or presystematic use of the not yet fully acquired form or from true avoidance. True avoidance, as illustrated in this study, will result when contrastive analysis predicts structural similarity but the target structure is avoided in L2 not because of the complexity of the form but because of the meaning attached to that form in L1. Restrictions in L1 cause the form to be avoided in L2 for contexts in which it is not normally used in L1.

Distribution rules of the type examined here appear to be among the last and most difficult to be acquired. There is no research to indicate whether they are indeed acquireable. Only study on long term, highly integrated bilinguals will clarify this. This study indicates that, while a bilingual may be able to acquire the formal aspects of a language and the phonological and syntactic components of his approximative system may reach a high level, the inability to acquire the semantically constrained distributional rules concerned with the selection of a particular form from among options may be one of the characteristics of foreignism which remain.

Notes

1. The reverse of avoidance is also evident, when, rather than avoid a structure, bilinguals tend to over-use a particular structure in the target language. M. Chasen (p.c.) related that Americans tend to transfer the use of progressive verb forms to Mexican Spanish. Native speakers use these forms infrequently and regard their use as a mark of educated or perhaps stilted speech. The author has had the same experience with the overuse of Hebrew (L2) passive.

2. An extreme or strong Whorfian position might argue that Creole speakers could not acquire the concept of passive. However, a modified or weak relativity position (e.g., Lenneberg, 1967) would claim that concepts not expressed in one language can be acquired in another because of a universal human capacity for conceptualization. In the view expressed by this article, avoidance may be regarded as the psycholinguistic product of incomplete conceptualization. But in contrast to Corder's incomplete learning or presystematic stage, the form or lack of it is a rule governed characteristic of the learner's interlanguage. It may also be hypothesized that within a single language group of bilinguals, there may be different degrees of avoidance. (See, for example, the range of use of the passive in Tablve V.)

3. It is not the purpose of this study to define which theoretical framework would be the most appropriate for such contrastive analysis. In the study described here, formal linguistic and intuitive criteria were used to judge cross-linguistic similarity.

4. Similar procedures are used in sociolinguistics. See for example Labov's (1969) variability approach.

5. After the linguistics students had written on the topics in Table I, they were asked what they noticed about all of the cues. Interestingly, not a single student noticed that all of the cues were formulated in the passive. All comments about the cues were centered around the content.

6. The Hebrew passive is formed by syntactic rearrangement rules and changes in the verb. Depending on the conjugation of the verb, either an infix or a combination prefix and infix are attached to the consonantal root. The syntactic rules including optional agent deletion are essentially the same as English.

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